

# Quantum key distribution with trusted quantum relay

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## Abstract

A trusted quantum relay is introduced to enable quantum key distribution links to form the basic legs in a quantum key distribution network. The idea is based on the well-known intercept/resend eavesdropping. The same scheme can be used to make quantum key distribution between several parties. No entanglement is required.

## 1 Introduction

In the field of quantum information, quantum key distribution [1, 2] is the application which is more developed, to the point that commercial prototypes exist. The strength of quantum key distribution namely that security is based on the basic laws of quantum physics, is somehow also its weakness. The fact that measurements will disturb the state, that perfect quantum cloning is not possible, makes it impossible to make, for example, perfect quantum repeaters, which puts a limitation on the practical implementations.

Until now quantum key distribution has mainly been considered a point-to-point link between Alice and Bob. However, recently discussion has started on how to form quantum key distribution networks. And not only theoretical networks where one can imagine using distributed multipartite entanglement and prolong the distance with entanglement swapping, but practical networks which can be implemented with today's technology.

We suggest a very simple quantum relay, which when trusted can be used as a basic building block in forming a network. The relay is basically performing the well-known intercept/resend eavesdropping strategy [3], but is cooperating with Alice and Bob. The protocol can also be seen as a concatenation of quantum key distribution protocols. The requirement is that the relay has to be trusted, since in principle the relay will know the key generated by Alice and Bob.

As always nothing comes for free, and the price that Alice and Bob have to pay is a lower key generation rate. This may put some practical limitations to how many relays a network can contain. On the other hand, due to the simple working structure of the quantum relay, it is easy to implement different parts of a network with different quantum key distribution platforms. Which means that some parts of the network can be carried out by fiber implementations, for example within cities, whereas the connection between cities could be carried out by, for example, free space implementation either by line of sight or even ground to satellite.

It should be stressed that as far as a QKD network is built without quantum repeaters using entanglement swapping, teleportation etc. and is implemented only in fibers and with the quantum relays we introduce in this paper, the maximum distance is still limited to around 100km. This point will be discussed in details in section 5.

We base the protocol on the BB84 protocol for quantum cryptography [1]. However, it should be possible to consider a similar scenario using other protocols for quantum key distribution.

The paper is organized as follows: In section 2, we present the simplest scenario, Alice and Bob and in the middle a trusted quantum relay, Trent [4]. In section 3, we introduce the eavesdropper and consider simple intercept/resend eavesdropping. Section 4 is dedicated to a discussion of how to use the proposed protocol for multi partite quantum key distribution and of how to get the most out of the data. Section 5 is dedicated to a discussion of the impossibility of extending the distance between Alice and Bob in some situations. In section 6, we discuss the network structure and topology of a simple network for quantum key distribution. Finally, in section 7 we conclude.

## 2 Trusted quantum relay: the protocol

Suppose that Alice and Bob want to establish a secret key by means of quantum key distribution and that they use the BB84 protocol, however

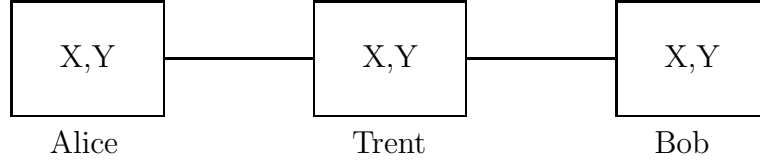


Figure 1: The basic scenario: Alice and Bob are connected via the trusted quantum relay station, Trent.

their conditions are such that the need to go via a trusted quantum relay, Trent. Trent's role in the protocol is basically to perform the well-known intercept/resend eavesdropping — but afterwards assist Alice and Bob in the sifting procedure. Step by step the protocol becomes:

1. Alice prepares a qubit in one of the four states  $\pm x$  or  $\pm y$ , and sends it to Trent
2. Trent measures, as if he was Bob, in either the  $X$  or the  $Y$  basis. According to the result of his measurement, he prepares the same state that he found in this measurement and sends it to Bob.
3. Bob measures in the  $X$  or the  $Y$  basis.
4. Alice, Trent and Bob repeat the first 3 steps many times.
5. *The relay sifting procedure:* Trent announces in which basis has measured each qubit, Alice and Bob take note of this; if there are more than one relay, each one of them announces the basis used for each qubit; The role of Trent (or of all relays) is now over.
6. Alice and Bob sifting procedure: Alice and Bob announce to each other which basis they used, and they keep only the qubits for which Alice, Trent and Bob used the same basis.
7. Alice and Bob proceed with the estimate of the error rate followed by error correction and privacy amplification to obtain a secret key — as in the standard BB84 protocol.

Notice that after step 5, Alice and Bob can use a different classical communication channel since Trent does not need to be informed of the following steps. It is also clear that Alice and Bob lose more data during the sifting procedure than they do in the standard BB84 protocol. In a point to point link, they keep about  $1/2$  of the raw data. Whereas with Trent in the middle there is only probability  $1/4$  that they all used the

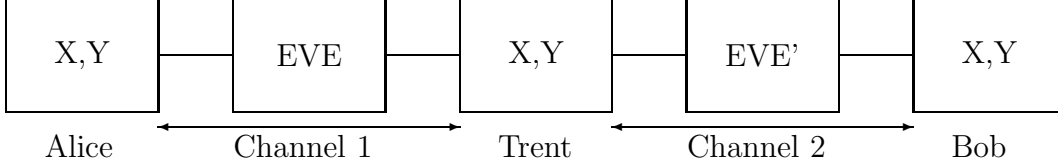


Figure 2: The basic eavesdropping scenario: Alice-Eve-Trent-Eve' and Bob.

same basis, which means that they can only keep  $1/4$  of the data. In the presence of  $N$  relays, this becomes  $1/2^{N+1}$ .

If Trent is acting correctly, that is he performs the measurements defined by the protocol, resends the states he finds and announces the bases he has used, then Alice and Bob theoretically should find no errors in the sifted key. The situation is hereafter the same as for the standard BB84; Alice and Bob can continue the classical part of the protocol and obtain a secret key.

It is clear that Alice and Bob need to trust Trent, since they (in ideal situations) all share the same raw data, hence if Trent listens on the classical communication between Alice and Bob, he can obtain the same secret key. From this point of view, making Trent listen to the classical communication between Alice and Bob, leads to all three (or  $N$ ) of them to share the same secret key. This is correct if there will not be errors or attacks by Eve, as we will see in the next section.

### 3 Including the eavesdropper, Eve

As always the security is based on what Eve can do and how much information she can retrieve from the system. In this case the full analysis becomes more complicated because Eve can eavesdrop on two channels: Channel 1, from Alice to Trent and channel 2, from Trent to Bob.

However, there is one very important point which should be kept in mind, namely that the two channels are used at different times. Which means that Eve at no point has access to both channels at the same time. This prevents Eve from doing some kinds of joint attacks on the two channels, at most she could let the same ancilla interact with both channels and make one measurement. However these general considerations are beyond the scope of this paper. Here we will only consider very simple attacks like the intercept/resend eavesdropping in both chan-

nels, as these will give a first indication of the security of the protocol. Moreover, it has recently been shown [5], that if the eavesdropper has no quantum memory, the optimal eavesdropping attack is actually the intercept/resend.

Lets first consider Eve doing an intercept/resend attack. If she attacks only one channel, either 1 or 2, there is no difference in the analysis with respect to the standard BB84. For example, the amount of errors she introduces in the sifted key are the same, approximately 25%.

Consider then the case in which Eve attacks both channels with intercept/resend. The first question is about the amount of information that she can get by attacking both channels. Doing intercept/resend on the first channel, for half of the qubits sent by Alice, Eve uses the same basis, thus she obtains 1 bit of information per qubit, i.e. all the information sent by Alice. For these qubits Eve can gain no more information by eavesdropping on the second channel. For the other half of the qubits sent by Alice, Eve uses the wrong basis on the first channel, and obtains a fully random result, so 0 bit of information. Moreover she sends to Trent a random bit, which means that the result of Trent is random, and even if Eve would eavesdrop a second time on the qubit sent by Trent, she would obtain a random result. Thus Eve does not increase her information by eavesdropping on both channels.

Lets now consider the errors she introduces by eavesdropping twice, this analysis will anyway give us some insights in the properties of our protocol.

If she attacks both channels with intercept/resend, she has to decide if she chooses at random the bases she uses for both channels, or in the second channel she uses the same basis she has used for the first. It is easy to see that if she chooses independently the bases in the two channels, she introduces approximately 37.5% errors in Bob's sifted key. This result can be obtained as follows. After she eavesdrops on the first channel, Eve introduces 25% of error in Trent's sifted key. Since Eve eavesdrops independently in the second channel, she will introduce 25% of errors on the 75% of right qubits of the sifted key sent by Trent, thus adding other 18.75% of wrong bits to Bob's sifted key. For the 25% of wrong bits of the sifted key sent by Trent to Bob, again Eve introduces 25% of errors for Bob with respect to Trent, but now this means that Bob would measure the correct bit with respect to Alice. So for 6.25% of wrong bits of the sifted key sent by Trent to Bob, Bob will measure a correct bit with respect to Alice. The total error in Bob's sifted key is then  $(25 + 18.75 - 6.25) = 37.5\%$

Notice that Trent and Bob sifted keys are different, in particular

among the different bits there are 6.25% of errors in Trent sifted key with respect to Alice sifted key, which are not present in Bob sifted key. Thus, when Alice and Bob run the error correction algorithm, they will not correct these errors. Even if Trent follows Alice and Bob error correction, Trent's key will still be different from Alice and Bob's key.

Since we have assumed that Eve does independent attacks on both channels, it follows that this result can be applied also to experimental errors. Let assume that both channel 1 and 2 have independent experimental errors, that is QBER value  $D_i$  ( $0 \leq D_i \leq 1$ ). Thus it follows that in Trent sifted key statistically there are  $D_1 D_2$  errors not present in Bob's sifted key, with respect to Alice sifted key. If Trent follows Alice and Bob error correction and privacy amplification, he would get a key very similar but not identical to the one shared by Alice and Bob. Notice that the knowledge of Trent on the sifted key is very large ( $D_i$  must be small for QKD to be able to produce a secret key), thus it is not possible in general to arbitrarily reduce Trent's information on the final key as it is done for Eve in the privacy amplification phase of the protocol. Thus even if Trent secret key will not be exactly identical to the one of Alice and Bob, Trent will have too much information on the key and will have to be trusted.

Alternatively Eve can use in the second channel the same basis she used in the first. The analysis is similar to the previous one, and one obtains that Eve introduces in Bob sifted key 25% of errors, as if she would eavesdrop just on one channel. But this time the number of wrong bits in Trent sifted key which are correct in Bob is up to 12.5%. This different result is due to the fact that the errors introduced by Eve in the two channels are correlated and not independent.

Notice that as long as Trent does not take part in the error correction, but only in the sifting procedure, it is impossible for Alice and Bob to know where an error has occurred, if it has occurred in the first or the second channel; that is effectively Alice and Bob have only one long communication channel.

Even for optimal eavesdropping strategies, i.e. when Eve uses both an ancilla and a quantum memory, we expect to find that the best that she can do is to eavesdrop in only one channel. Except perhaps for the very special situation where Eve let's the same ancilla interact with the qubit in both channels. However, an analysis of these attacks is beyond the scope of this paper.

|            | 1        | 2        | 3 | 4        | 5        | 6        | 7 | 8        |
|------------|----------|----------|---|----------|----------|----------|---|----------|
| Alice (A)  | <b>X</b> | <b>X</b> | X | X        | <b>Y</b> | <b>Y</b> | Y | Y        |
| Carol (C)  | <b>X</b> | <b>X</b> | Y | <b>Y</b> | <b>Y</b> | <b>Y</b> | X | <b>X</b> |
| Bob (B)    | <b>X</b> | Y        | X | <b>Y</b> | <b>Y</b> | X        | Y | <b>X</b> |
| Secret Key | A-C-B    | A-C      | – | C-B      | A-C-B    | A-C      | – | C-B      |

Table 1: The table displays all the different measurement situations, and how they can be used to create secret key between the different parties. Boldface indicates the parties which can generate a secret key in the given situation because they have used the same basis, the names are also given in the last line.

## 4 Key distribution between several parties

As we have seen in the previous sections, if there would be no experimental errors, the protocol described in section 2 would, with minor modifications, become a quantum key distribution protocol between three parties. It would in principle be enough for Trent to listen to Alice and Bob’s public discussion and perform the error correction and privacy amplification algorithm as they do. To allow Trent to share the final secret key with Alice and Bob, it is necessary to modify the protocol, adding a modified error correction phase.

In the modified protocol we present in this section, the third party’s name is Carol instead of Trent, who is only a trusted arbitrator. The difference between Trent and Carol is that Carol takes part in error correction and privacy amplification. Hence she actively takes part in the full protocol as a third member on equal footing with Alice and Bob.

Concerning the error correction protocol, one possibility is to run it in two steps. First there is an error correction run by Alice and Carol, to which Bob listens and acts accordingly. At the end of this first run Carol and Alice keys are identical. Then Alice (or Carol) runs another error correction with Bob, now Carol (or Alice) listens and acts accordingly. Notice that Carol in this case must implement a full QKD node, all phases of the protocol must be run by Carol, and at the end all three share the same identical key.

In this case a more detailed analysis for the quantum channel is possible, in the sense that during the error correction part of the protocol, it will become evident where an error has occurred, if it was in channel 1 or channel 2, thanks to the fact that Carol participates in the error correction phase.

As it has been described in section 2, including an extra party means

losing more data in the sifting procedure. This is because the probability that the three parties all choose the same basis is only  $1/4$ . Which means that  $3/4$  of the data remains un-used. However, it is actually possible to use a big part of the remaining data to create secret keys between Alice and Carol or Carol and Bob, because these parties in some cases use the same basis and hence the protocol reduces to the traditional BB84 protocol for only two parties. The different measurement combinations and who can create a secret key in a given situation is shown in table 1. In this way we find the following use of the data:  $1/4$  of the data, columns 1 and 5, can be used to create a secret key between all three parties;  $1/4$ , cols. 2 and 6, for creating a secret key between Alice and Carol;  $1/4$ , cols. 4 and 8, for creating a secret key between Carol and Bob; whereas the last  $1/4$  of the data, cols. 3 and 7, has to be disregarded, since no secret key can be extracted from these data.

This means that actually  $3/4$  of the data can be used and only  $1/4$  remains to be thrown away. Notice one interesting point namely that as long as data are distributed via a relay, Alice and Bob can not produce a secure *bipartite* key between them. This is because even if Trent/Carol is not actively participating in the error correction and privacy amplification part of the protocol, he/she will always have a lot of information on the key and has to be trusted.

In section 3 we argued that an eavesdropper could not benefit from eavesdropping in both channels, because with Trent as a trusted arbitrator in the middle, Alice and Bob effectively share one long quantum channel. However, this is no longer the case when Alice, Bob and Carol are equal partners, since in this case the three parties have and analyze independently the two channels. Moreover, for Eve to gain information on all three keys she obviously will be forced to eavesdrop in both channels.

## 5 Relaying and extending the distance

It would be very interesting to find ways to extend the reach of QKD without implementing entanglement swapping, teleportation or resorting to classical cryptography. At first sight it could seem that the protocol presented in section 2 could *always* extend the distance between Alice and Bob. This is not true, and we recall here the reasons for this.

As of today, QKD is limited to a range of about 100km, the main limiting factor is due to losses. The main points of loss of photons in today QKD system using optical fibers are (1) low efficiency of the



detectors, approximately 10%, (2) losses in the fibers, characterized by  $\alpha$  in dB/Km which for the Telecom wavelength 1550nm has a typical value of 0.25dB/Km. The losses of the detector are independent of the distance between Alice and Bob, whereas the losses in the fibers are the real limiting factor on the distance. In standard Telecom communications in optical fibers, these losses are compensated by repeaters, which in practice repopulate of the lost photons the wave-packet. Since QKD uses single photons, once a photon is absorbed by the fiber there could not be any kind of repeater which can recreate it. Thus quantum repeaters which work in a similar way as the classical ones do not exist.

Let's consider Alice, Trent and Bob and assume that the transmission of the line connecting Alice with Trent is  $t_1$  and that of Trent with Bob is  $t_2$ , and that the two lines have length  $d_1$  and  $d_2$  respectively. Since when a photon is absorbed before reaching Trent, obviously Trent cannot send anything to Bob, Bob receives a fraction  $t_1 t_2$  of the photons sent by Alice.

Consider now the case when Alice is directly connected to Bob with a line of length  $d_1 + d_2$ . Since the transmission of a line is given by

$$t = 10^{-\alpha d/10} \quad (1)$$

the fraction of photons received by Bob is again  $t_1 t_2$ . This argument is of course very general and prevents the use of simple quantum relays to extend the maximum distance of QKD systems in fibers.

The quantum relays we have presented in section 2 have thus mainly two applications. The first is the possibility of realizing networks where different platforms are used in different legs of the network, as optical fibers and free space. The second is the possibility of realizing networks with more than two participants, where the relay permits to connect many Alices to many Bobs on request. These will be discussed in the next section.

For completeness, in the Appendix we also describe a very simple classical protocol with QKD relays which can *always* be used to extend the distance between Alice and Bob.

## 6 Networks and Topology

The protocol we proposed in section 2 gives the possibility of building more complicated network topologies. These in turn allow a better use of resources and possibility of services used on-demand. Still there are some limitations, the principal one being the fact that in the presence

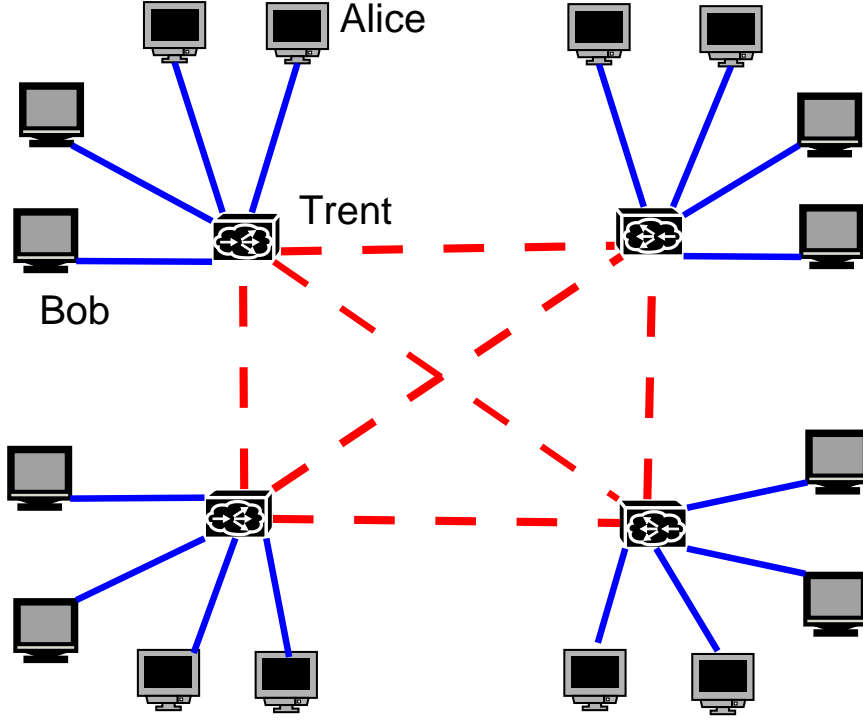


Figure 3: A simple network with Star topology between Alices and Bobs with Trents as centers, and Full-Mesh between Trents

of  $N$  relays, the average final secret key length is reduced by at least a factor  $1/2^{N+1}$  of the original qubits sent by Alice.

The most suitable network that can be adopted with these relays seems to be a Star topology between each Trent and all his Alices and Bobs, and a Full-mesh topology between all Trents. Thus for example one Trent could cover a metropolitan area and be connected by optical fibers with the Alices and Bobs, whereas the trust centers, i.e. different Trents, among themselves can be connected with free space links, even through satellites.<sup>1</sup>

In Figure 3 we give an example of this network with four Trents. Notice that the number of links between Trents grows as  $N^2$ , but that any link connecting one Alice to one Bob will pass either one Trent, if Bob is in the same star as Alice, or two Trents if Bob is in another star.

In these networks it is only possible to create secret keys shared be-

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<sup>1</sup>Of course this will be practically possible only if the transmission of the free space link will be good enough to guarantee that enough qubits reach Bob, as we have discussed in section 5.

tween one Alice and one Bob, and as we have seen in the previous section, in case also with Trent/Carol.

## 7 Conclusions

We have introduced a quantum relay in order to form the basic leg in a quantum key distribution network. The quantum relay performs intercept/resend eavesdropping — but collaborates with Alice and Bob in the sifting phase. The protocol can also be seen as a concatenation of quantum key distribution protocols. We have used the well-known BB84 protocol. The quantum relay, Trent, has to be trusted, since he in principle shares the same data with Alice and Bob. The cost for introducing a quantum relay is a lower key generation rate. A minor modification in the protocol allows for multi user quantum key distribution.

One big advantage is that the proposed quantum relay can be implemented with today's technologies, and hence would make it possible to form small networks for quantum key distribution. Another advantage is that the nature of the relay is so simple that it allows to mix different quantum key distribution platforms. For example, one could imagine metropolitan areas connects via optical fiber links, whereas links between cities may be served by free space links. More results on networking and QKD will be presented in ref. [6].

It should be stressed again that the quantum relay has to be trusted, which means that Trent collaborates fully with Alice and Bob. A first analysis indicates that an eavesdropper who tries to learn the secret key will not be able to get more information than in the standard BB84 protocol for two parties. And we conjecture that the security of the protocol including Trent is the same as for the standard BB84.

## Appendix

In this Appendix we describe very shortly another protocol including quantum relays similar to the previous one, but in which the relaying part is completely classical. This will allow actually to obtain an extension of the distance between Alice and Bob even with the current implementations in optical fibers. Assume that Alice and Bob are connected by  $N$  relays linearly, as in a chain. The protocol is as follows:

1. Each relay runs a full BB84 (or any QKD) protocol with both its right and left peer; Alice and Bob, who are at the ends of the chain,

run the protocol with the relay to their left/right; in this way  $N + 1$  different secret keys (possibly of different length) are established; each relay knows 2 secret keys.

2. All relays announce publicly the XOR of the two secret keys (reducing the longest key to the length of the shortest discarding the high order bits); The role of the relays ends here.
3. Alice and Bob take the XOR of their secret key with the XOR-key announced by the next relay thus discovering the other secret key of the relay; they proceed in this way until they get the secret key of each other (in doing these operations all keys are always reduced to the length of the shortest one by discarding the high order bits).
4. Alice and Bob concatenate all secret keys and run a privacy amplification algorithm on this; the order of magnitude of the shrinking parameter can be estimated to be  $NL$  bits where  $L$  is the reduced length of each secret key; The reason for this step is that in announcing publicly the XOR, Eve has learnt  $NL$  bits of information which should be removed.

The final secret key has length  $L$ , which in practice is of the order of the shortest of the  $N + 1$  initial secret keys. With respect to the protocol discussed in this paper, this protocol does not shrink the final secret key depending on the number of relays. On the other side the role of the relays is much higher, since they have to run each *two full* QKD protocols, plus the managing the resulting secret keys. Moreover in this case, also all relays can run steps 3 and 4, obtaining the exact final secret key.

## Acknowledgment

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